

Is JAC's View Compatible with the New Perspective on Paul?

Recommended reading to understand the "New Perspective" on Paul:

Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The "Lutheran" Paul and His Critics
by Stephen Westerholm; published by Eerdmans

A Synopsis of Each of the Three Views (for the sake of comparison)

Traditional view:

Every human being—whether Jew or Gentile—is deserving of divine condemnation. The Jew should realize this from his abject failure to keep the Law. The Gentile should realize this from the godlessness and immorality that characterizes his entire existence. Accordingly, how a person can escape condemnation and be blessed with Life instead is the most important question that any individual will ever face.

No human being could ever merit Life (the blessing of Abraham) by his obedience to the Covenant. Every human being is hopelessly depraved. Therefore no one is able to offer up the sort of obedience that would qualify him as worthy of a blessing. (Nothing short of flawless obedience to all that the Covenant requires would render a person worthy of the blessing of eternal Life. But no human being, depraved as he is, can keep the Covenant flawlessly.) Every person's evil renders him deserving of condemnation instead. So, no human being can obtain the blessing of Abraham (eternal Life) unless he is granted it as a gift of divine mercy. Therefore, the all important question is this: who will escape the condemnation they deserve and receive mercy from God instead?

God cannot violate the demands of his justice. Therefore, God can only extend mercy if he does so in a way that divine justice is satisfied. In the man Jesus, God has created a way to do that. Any human being who believes in Jesus will be qualified to receive the blessing of eternal Life. For, in Jesus' death, God arranged for his debt to divine justice to be satisfied; and, in the imputation of Jesus' righteousness, God arranged for him, as a gift of divine mercy, to be made worthy of the blessing of eternal Life.

The news of this merciful provision from God is the gospel that Paul proclaims. One must respond to this good news by embracing the truth about Jesus and by forsaking all attempts to merit eternal Life by Covenant-keeping. Covenant-keeping is antithetical to believing the truth about Jesus—it is contrary to believing that God has offered us a wonderful gift of mercy. Hence, the follower of Jesus must abandon Covenant-keeping as a means to attain Life.

Summary: It is people who accept the grace of God who will be saved; not people who try to earn eternal Life by means of their meritorious efforts ! The grace of God is found in Jesus; so it is those who embrace the truth about Jesus who will be saved. The Jews' mistake was that they thought they could earn their salvation by means of their meritorious efforts to keep the Mosaic Covenant. By rejecting the truth about Jesus, they were rejecting the only way that any human being can find Life—as a gift of divine mercy.

New Perspective*??:

Every human being, due to his innate sinfulness, is under divine judgment. But the good news is that God will grant eternal Life (the blessing of Abraham) to those who belong to him, to those who are included as among his people. The Jews have always understood that they are the people of God, that they are the people who have been chosen for the merciful blessing of eternal Life. They have always believed that the distinctive symbols of their Jewish identity (circumcision, dietary regulations, Sabbath-keeping, etc.) are the markers that identify them as *bona fide* members of the people of God.

But the Jews are mistaken about this. As a matter of fact, this attitude among the Jews is terribly sinful; it is wickedly ethno-centric, racist, nationalistic, and exclusivist. Furthermore, their belief is wrong; it is not consistent with the truth about how God has purposed to form his people.

God's ultimate purpose was to reverse and undo the curse that rested on mankind on account of their sinfulness. But his purpose was to do so through Jesus—through his death and resurrection. Accordingly, in Jesus, God has established a radically different marker of who it is that belongs to God. The one who belongs to the people of God is the one who believes in Jesus. Therefore, it is the one who believes in Jesus who stands to receive eternal Life (the blessing of Abraham).

Summary: It is Christians—followers of Jesus—who will be saved; not Jews! The Jews' mistake was that they thought *they* were saved; they thought *they* were the people of God. But, in fact, it is believers in Jesus—Jew or Gentile—who are the true people of God.

JAC'S View:

Every human being—whether Jew or Gentile—is deserving of divine condemnation. The Jew should realize this from his abject failure to keep the Law. The Gentile should realize this from the godlessness and immorality that characterizes his entire existence. Accordingly, how a person can escape condemnation and be blessed with Life instead is the most important question that any individual will ever face.

No human being could ever merit Life (the blessing of Abraham) by his obedience to the Covenant. Every human being is hopelessly depraved. Therefore no one is able to offer up the sort of obedience that would qualify him as worthy of a blessing. Every person's evil renders him deserving of condemnation instead. So, no human being can obtain the blessing of Abraham (eternal Life) unless he is granted it as a gift of divine mercy. Therefore, the all-important question is this: who will escape the condemnation they deserve and receive mercy from God instead?

The person who will receive mercy is the person to whom God, in his sovereignty, chooses to extend mercy. The ones to whom God has chosen to extend mercy are not left invisible; they are marked with a discernible mark—a mark made by God on the innermost core of their being. The individual whom God has chosen for mercy is transformed in the commitments of his heart; his inner being is reoriented to be receptive to God and the things of God. No longer is he oriented away from God and hostile to all that God values and does.

There are a number of ways that such a reorientation could express itself. A Jew under the Mosaic Covenant could express this supernatural reorientation by valuing, honoring, and seeking to obey the Covenant and by making an authentic effort to honor the God who made the Covenant. Such a Jew would thereby reveal the fact that he has been chosen by God to receive mercy.

But ever since Jesus, the *messiah*, has come into the world, the more typical way that one expresses the supernatural reorientation of his inner being is by fully embracing the truth about Jesus. He embraces the truth of Jesus' identity as the promised *messiah*; and he embraces the meaning and significance of Jesus' death and subsequent resurrection.

Because Jesus is the ultimate end of all that God is doing in human history, the truth about Jesus is the ultimate determinative test of whether one's inner being has been supernaturally reoriented by God. No one who has been chosen by God to receive mercy can ultimately reject the truth about Jesus, the Son of God.

But, however much Jesus is the ultimate and final test, he is not the only test of who will receive mercy. Depending upon the historical circumstances in which a man finds himself, there are different ways in which the divine transformation of his inner being can express itself. But all of them mean exactly the same thing—such a person is destined for mercy and not condemnation.

The mistake that many will make is this: they might go through the outward motions of honoring God and his Covenant; but without any inward substance. They do outward actions intended to simulate Covenant-keeping; but there is no authentic heart commitment that reflects a genuine interest in keeping the Covenant. Such outward "works"—in and of themselves—do not mark someone as destined for mercy and Life. It is the authentic inward desire to keep the Covenant that marks someone as destined for mercy and Life.

Analogously, there can be outward actions that are intended to simulate belief in Jesus without there actually being a genuine belief in Jesus. If there is no authentic heart commitment to the truth about Jesus, such outward "works" of belief do not mark someone as destined for mercy and Life. It is the inward reality of a heart that is authentically committed to the truth about Jesus that marks someone as destined for mercy and Life.

For Paul, the separation of those who will be granted Life from those who will receive condemnation is not the separation between the Mosaic Covenant and faith in Jesus; it is rather the separation between inward reality and merely outward behavior.

Summary: It is inwardly sanctified individuals who will be saved. It is not people who make the outward motions of loving God and truth that will be saved; it is those people who love God and truth from the depth of their inner, existential commitments. The Jews' mistake was that, generally speaking, they thought that their merely outward actions and behaviors were sufficient to mark them as destined for the merciful blessing of eternal Life. Their rejection of Jesus is what revealed that their alleged love for God was actually only outward. It was superficial and inauthentic; not deep and genuine.

A Comparison of Three Views on Paul: Comparing Their Respective Answers to a Series of Questions

QUESTION	TRADITIONAL VIEW	NEW PERSPECTIVE	JAC'S VIEW
<p>Was Pharisaical Judaism legalistic? [Note: "legalism" is a very poorly defined theological term that is never used by Paul.]</p>	<p>YES</p>	<p>NO</p>	<p>YES, if legalism = believing that one's Law obedience makes one in some undefined sense deserving of mercy from God. NO (probably), if legalism = believing that an autonomous human being is capable of being good in such a way that he can deserve God's blessing and in no way needs grace and mercy.</p>
<p>The following is the right way to characterize Paul's teaching <i>vis à vis</i> the teaching of the Pharisees: the Pharisees believed that one gets eternal Life by living in a way that deserves it, while Paul believed that one gets eternal Life as a gift of divine grace and mercy?</p>	<p>YES</p>	<p>NO, the Pharisees would agree with Paul that it is a gift of grace and mercy.</p>	<p>YES and NO. It is entirely possible, even probable, that the Pharisees taught that eternal Life comes as a gift of divine grace and mercy. However, teaching such and truly embracing it as one's actual working understanding are two entirely different things. I think there can be no question but what Paul (and Jesus) discerned that the actual, working understanding of the typical Pharisee was that his Law-keeping made him worthy of and deserving of the divine blessing of Life. Accordingly, both Paul and Jesus were critical of the self-delusion within Phariseism that kept them from facing the reality of their own inherent evil and moral unworthiness.</p>

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<p>Was Paul's objection to Pharisaical Judaism its legalism?</p>	<p>YES</p>	<p>NO. Paul's problem was that it did not rightly understand how God purposed to save mankind, its misunderstanding was sinful insofar as it made God's salvation ethno-centric.</p>	<p>YES, if legalism=believing that one's Law obedience makes one in some undefined sense deserving of mercy from God. > Perhaps most accurately, Paul's objection to Pharisaical Judaism (in exact correspondence to Jesus' objection) was its entrenched self-delusion, its support for an individual's complete unwillingness to face into the reality of his own personal moral unworthiness by its encouraging him to see himself as worthy when he "kept" the Law.</p>
<p>Was Paul's teaching that it is by belief that one attains <i>dikaosune</i> an answer to this question: How can a sinner obtain the blessing of God's grace?</p>	<p>YES</p>	<p>NO, rather it was an answer to the question: on what basis will one be granted membership in the people of God.</p>	<p>YES. Nothing could be more obvious. I don't understand the distinction the New Perspective wants to make. Why would one care whether he is a member of the people of God unless being a member of the people of God is the basis for obtaining the blessing of divine grace?</p>
<p>Did Paul vigorously promote <i>dikaosune</i> by faith in order to promote inclusiveness and egalitarianism in God's saving work?</p>	<p>NO, rather it was because salvation was not possible in any other way. As it happens, inclusiveness is an important ramification of <i>dikaosune</i> by faith, but that is not the reason why Paul promoted it.</p>	<p>YES</p>	<p>NO, rather it was because, with the coming of Jesus, the final and decisive measure of one's salvation was one's belief in Jesus. Hence, once Jesus has appeared, it is the typical and ordinary means to salvation. As it happens, inclusiveness is an important ramification of <i>dikaosune</i> by faith, but that is not the reason</p>

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<p>Do the “works of the Law” that Paul contends cannot lead to <i>dikaosune</i> include acts of moral goodness?</p>	<p>YES, in fact, it is these that are primarily in view, because, due to universal moral depravity, no human being can perform true moral goodness.</p>	<p>NO, rather, what is in view are those demands of the Law that require the distinctively Jewish practices: e.g., circumcision, Sabbath-keeping, dietary regulations.</p>	<p>YES, but these are NOT primarily what are in view. What are primarily in view are the distinctive religious practices of the Jews— e.g., circumcision, Sabbath-keeping, dietary regulations. The context into which Paul is speaking about “works of the Law” is a context wherein certain Jewish believers claim that one cannot be a true disciple of Jesus (and be saved) unless he practices ALL of the Law, including the distinctive religious practices of the Jews.</p>
<p>Would the Pharisees understand God’s judgment of an individual on the basis of the Mosaic Covenant to be a strict weighing of the “value” of his acts of obedience against the “value” of his acts of disobedience?</p>	<p>YES, and that was their mistake; for, in truth, any disobedience whatsoever would require condemnation by the Law.</p>	<p>NO, The question God would consider is whether one’s actions reflect a rejection of the Covenant or not. Only the one who rejected the Covenant would be condemned by God under the terms of the Covenant.</p>	<p>YES and NO. It would not surprise me if both views were espoused by different rabbis at different times. Paul does not believe that the Mosaic Covenant would condemn someone for being a sinner (contrary to the traditional view); it would only condemn one for being a rebel against God and his Covenant (similar to the New Perspective’s take on the Jewish view).</p>

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<p>From Paul's perspective, is it theoretically possible to be saved by keeping the Mosaic Covenant?</p>	<p>NO, to be saved by keeping the Mosaic Covenant, one's behaviors would need to conform flawlessly to every single one of its requirements. Given the nature of universal human sin, that is not possible.</p>	<p>?? YES, one would simply need to embrace the demands of the Covenant as the way of demonstrating that one wants to throw in one's lot with the people of God. One need not obey every requirement flawlessly, but one would need to demonstrate a sincere attempt to honor God by keeping his Covenant.</p>	<p>YES, to "keep" the Covenant is simply to value God, the maker of the Covenant, to value the Covenant he has made, and to demonstrate that one values both by earnestly and seriously attempting to live in accord with God's Covenant. One would not need to conform flawlessly to every single one of its requirements in order to be said to be "keeping" it. Even within the Covenant there was provision for failure to keep its requirements.</p>
<p>From Paul's perspective, were any Jews ever saved by keeping the Mosaic Covenant?</p>	<p>NO</p>	<p>?? NO, the inherent evil in the Jews led them to reject God's purposes and to pridefully delude themselves into thinking that the Covenant was a basis for their salvation as an ethnic group that excluded Gentiles.</p>	<p>YES</p>
<p>From Paul's perspective, were any Gentiles ever saved apart from both the Mosaic Covenant and apart from Jesus—merely on the basis of their "keeping" a universal moral law?</p>	<p>NO</p>	<p>??NO</p>	<p>YES, presumably, but even if Paul only entertains such a person hypothetically, as a mere theoretical possibility, he does so as a theoretical <u>possibility</u>, not as a theoretical <u>impossibility</u>.</p>
<p>From Paul's perspective, is Jesus the decisive event in God's salvation such that it would be impossible for any human being to be saved apart from Jesus?</p>	<p>YES. It is Jesus' death that pays the debt to divine justice for all mankind, and it is Jesus' imputed righteousness that is required to make a sinner acceptable to God.</p>	<p>YES. It is Jesus' death that "exhausts the curse" etc. Only in Jesus is God's true plan of salvation actually played out.</p>	<p>NO. The decisive event in God's salvation is God's choice to extend mercy to whomever he will. Jesus is the final, ultimate, and decisive test of whether one will receive mercy, but it is not as if God cannot</p>

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			extend mercy apart from Jesus.
Accordingly, from Paul's perspective, is it the case that ONLY Christians can receive the blessing of Abraham?	YES , at least in the sense that no one can receive the blessing of Abraham on any other terms other than the <i>dikaosune</i> that Jesus has accomplished for them.	??YES	NO , not in the sense that it is impossible for God to grant the blessing of Abraham to anyone who does not explicitly believe in Jesus, and not in the sense that God needed Jesus' "work" in order to extend mercy to any human being.
From Paul's perspective, is the centrality of Jesus a matter of his being central to God's saving activity?	YES	YES	NO . The centrality of Jesus is due to his being the Son, the first-born of all creation, the one who will rule as God for all eternity in the final Age of the creation. As such, he plays a decisive role in God's saving purposes as well, but that is not the essence of his centrality. God can save with or without Jesus. But everyone who is saved will be subject to Jesus in the eternal Kingdom. That is why Jesus is of central importance.
From Paul's perspective, is the "good news" the good news that we can be saved by Jesus' death?	YES	?? YES	NO , at least not only and exclusively this. It is equally true that the "good news" is the news that the King has come who will rule in the eternal Kingdom of God. The good news is that God, therefore, is going to keep his promises. We can now know that God has not forsaken us. Those who believe, who embrace this truth, will be saved

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			and experience the benefit of this good news.
For Paul, is a critical element of the belief that one must have to attain <i>dikaiousune</i> the belief that one is hopelessly evil and, therefore, hopelessly unworthy of the divine blessing?	YES , but this is generally encouraged more at the level of doctrine than it is at the level of personal self-evaluation. One can embrace the doctrine of personal evil without having a working understanding that I, personally, am unworthy. Indeed, one can believe oneself worthy only to the extent that he believes the doctrine that he is unworthy.	??NO , at least the emphasis seems to be more on one's choosing to follow Jesus than on any in-depth understanding of one's own sinfulness. Indeed, the new perspective wants to downplay individual soul-searching in general.	YES , and at much more than the level of doctrine. It is critical that such belief be the working understanding that one has of his own personal being. It must exist at the level of authentic personal self-evaluation.
Is part of the significance of our believing in Jesus, for Paul, the fact that it tests our belief in whether we are evil enough to deserve condemnation?	YES and NO . This is probably implicit within the traditional view. but it is not typically emphasized within the traditional view.	??NO , the new perspective wants to downplay individual soul-searching in general.	YES , absolutely.

* The "New Perspective" is a broad category that encompasses many different individual perspectives. Not everyone so categorized would answer all the above questions in exactly the same way. Each has his own different, distinctive perspective on Paul. For this reason—and because my knowledge and understanding of the New Perspective is quite limited—the answers offered above are, at best, only generally and approximately true. When I feel that I am especially ill-equipped to represent the answers of the New Perspective (even generally-speaking), I have marked my answers with a double question mark—??.